

CASE RESEARCH AND CASE TEACHING – IS IT POSSIBLE TO CLOSE THE DIVIDE?

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Abstract

From a teaching perspective, the case method is already well established in many, if not all, academic disciplines. From a research perspective, the method is well established in some academic communities, e.g. Sweden and also Scandinavia in general, where qualitative methods have gained an increasing acceptance, while it is less so in other communities, where quantitative methods still seems to be dominant. Also, even in communities where there is an acceptance for cases as a valid research method, there is a perceived gap between case research and case teaching, sometimes so wide as to define them as completely different activities. This means that proponents of the case method faces the dilemma that, in an environment where increasingly “research is king”, it is hard to get case development recognized as a valid academic activity. This paper is a first attempt to on one hand give some ontological and epistemological basis for the case method as such and on the other to close the divide between case research and case writing for educational purposes.

KEY WORDS: case research, case teaching, case studies, theory of science, research methods

INTRODUCTION

Some 25 years ago or so, there was a shortage of texts on the epistemological and ontological basis of case studies. At that time, this method was not very widespread and consequently a short treatise on the subject like Kjellén & Söderman [1980] enjoyed a fairly extensive use and also became one of the most cited works in the then new field of entrepreneurship research in Sweden.

Today, the situation is quite different. It is not so hard to find methodological texts, with titles like Case research [Yin 1994] or Case study research in education [Merriam 1994]. There is still, however, no universal consensus on the case study as a valid research approach, which means that it might still be hard to get recognition and publication, at least in some areas of research. And even when there is such recognition, it does not always extend to the writing of cases for teaching.

In 1993, an elective course in case writing was proposed for the doctoral programme at the Stockholm University School of Business. The requirement for the course would be to write a case, with an accompanying teaching note, and also to find a place in an undergraduate course to teach the case. This would have the benefit of giving the doctoral students some teaching experience, which was necessary in order to secure a position after graduation, and also create the much sought-after and hard to find link between research and education.

The reply from the professor in charge of the programme was that the content of the course was not enough grounded in research and consequently was of insufficient scientific “depth”. The situation is very much the same today, when it comes to Swedish universities: it is quite okay to do case research, it is

also fine to engage in the case method in teaching but these two activities are not seen as having any relation whatsoever.

This is the starting or “trigger” point of this paper: to explore the relationship between case research and case writing and to try to put forward some arguments in favour of seeing them as two sides of the same coin, if not exactly the same thing. No other articles or other writings on this subject were found during the preparation of this article, so it comes with no claims to finality or completeness in its treatment of the subject, but comments and suggestions to further the subject are welcome.

AN ONTOLOGICAL AND EPISTEMOLOGICAL BASIS FOR CASE RESEARCH

In this first section, some views on the scientific *raison d'être* for case research will be presented. In the following section, views on the case method for teaching will be presented in a similar manner, in order to have some comparison points for further discussion of the issue.

ON THE CONCEPT OF RELATIONS

The concept of *relations* is of great interest in any scientific discussion, especially regarding causal relations. Sometimes it seems that these relations are seen as more important than the concepts or phenomena themselves [Normann, 1975]. However, there are also other ways of looking at relations.

The Norwegian sociologist Österberg [1972] differentiates between extrinsic (“yttre”) and intrinsic (“indre”) relations. An extrinsic relation means that the objects involved are not changed by the relation (such as pearls are not changed by the string that holds them together). Intrinsic relations mean that the objects make up an undividable whole, one of the objects presupposes the other.

An empiricist view of the world takes the world and its human beings to be extrinsically related, as are the relations between phenomena on one hand and their descriptions on the other. Opposed to this, a phenomenological view of the world sees these relations as intrinsic; the emphasis by Bergson and Husserl on intentionality (that it is not possible to think without thinking *about* something) is one expression for this [Österberg 1972].

Normann [1975] expresses a similar view when he maintains that man, language and the outer world are three components of a system and cannot be defined independently of one another. All knowledge about reality is mediated and language is the link between man and reality. Language and theories are images of reality and at the same time influence how reality is perceived and what is seen as real [1975, p. 25] Reality is in other words a “social construction”.

Seen from this viewpoint, many of the “laws” or relations that seem to be found in society are not necessarily universal laws according to a natural scientific usage of the concept. They can be dependent on specific historical situations or the current “conventional wisdom”. This has at least two consequences for social scientific research.

Firstly, there is a need approaches that are grounded in a search for established meanings among the actors. Secondly, it is often more fruitful to look for patterns of thinking and concept forming than for universal laws and statistically significant correlations. Both these aspects of research points in favour of a case research approach, especially in connection to the previous discussion of the ontology of social reality.

ON THE DEVELOPMENT OF NEW THEORY

Scientific research is usually thought of as a two-step process: first some new ideas, concepts or relations are “discovered” or generated, which together constitutes what is called a theory, then this new theory is tested to see if it can be validated or refuted, or if it needs some modification. Usually, the emphasis is on the testing, rather than on the process of interesting discoveries.

In connection with the discussion of relations and concepts in the preceding section, it can be argued that new theory cannot be discovered or created just by amassing data; what is needed is a new perspective or the discovery of deviations and inconstancies, in comparison with what is currently taken as the generally accepted view.

These comparisons, then, are probably more fruitful if they are made from a fairly rich data set or from “thick descriptions”, to borrow a phrase from Geertz [1973]. If we, e.g., use a case study as the starting point, there are at least four possible types of comparisons to be made [Normann 1975, p. 75]:

- other cases;
- formal theories;
- ideal types;
- “traditional norms and perceptions”.

The basic rationale for making comparisons is, as Normann [1975, p. 75] puts it that “every comparison might be expected to reveal a deviation from the expected, which is a necessary first step in the development of something new”.

Here one finds a clear connection to Glaser & Strauss [1967] and what they call “the constant comparative method of qualitative analyses”: empirical data are used as indicators to generate theoretical concepts, but the basis for the subsequent development of the theory is not data as such but the resulting theoretical categories. It is their *theoretical relevance*, i.e. their ability to generate new categories that in the final analysis decides the choice of concepts. In a similar vein, the concept “analytical induction” [see e.g. Gouldner 1975, p. 353] means to arrive at general conclusions about a phenomenon by intensive study of individual cases, treated one at a time

Two reasonable conclusions can be drawn from this about the necessary characteristics of a successful research method for generating new theory. One is that should allow the collection of data about concepts of very diverse kinds and the other that it should be independent of any preconceived notions or previous knowledge about the subject of study. It follows that in depth case research is well suited for the “successful” generation of theory.

ON THE VALIDATION OF THEORY

Theories are supposed to be empirically verifiable, at least in principle, i.e. contain or lead to statements, the correctness of which can be tested by observations. The concept of observation, however, is problematic. Strictly speaking, it presupposes something “unmediated given”, some kind of sensory perception, which is not mediated or interpreted by any theory about the nature of reality. Churchmann [1947] describes this problem in the following way.

Even the simplest measurement requires at least a theory, which describes the principles of the instrument of measurement, or some other auxiliary theory. On the other hand, a theory cannot be formulated without at least some reference to the experiences of ourselves or someone else, which is a form of observation. So: no theory without observation and no observation without a theory. Even theories about how to construct theories require at least some observations of how thinking operates.

The obvious consequence regarding how to validate or test theories and research findings is this: the task is not to weigh or measure the truth through some predetermined procedure, but to argue for the acceptability of the findings. Validation is to convince the audience that the research and its findings are saying something about reality.

In this respect, there is no difference between traditional, statistical, hypotheses-testing methods and the case study. Empirical results of any kind are at best arguments, and it is not given a priori that a correlation coefficient is a better argument than a typology: “*It is not primarily through empirical evidence that theories may be declared to be true. --- Instead, empirical results are arguments that one theory may be more true than another, but the final choices between theories are made after, not empirical but theoretical and meta-theoretical deliberations.*” [Söderfelt 1976, pp. 32-33, author’s translation from the original].

The fact that it is impossible to put forward criteria for what is valid knowledge is often ignored, valid knowledge independent of any assumptions about the nature of reality and about what kind of knowledge that is possible to obtain, which means that what is seen as acceptable arguments is dependent on a specific world view

So, the conclusion is that cases can be acceptable arguments, but how may validations be performed on theories and observations that are derived from case studies? There are, according to Normann [1975, p. 69], two ways to confront theory with data. One is a traditional hypotheses-testing, the other is to “take a vast frame of perceptions and confront it on many points at the same time with a complex set of data in the form of a complex system or event.”

The possible objects of comparison, mentioned earlier, are other (formal) theories, ideal states or ideal types and other cases. This can be said to be similar to what is sometimes called “face validity” but there is one important difference: it is not about the verification of an isolated finding but of a theory as a whole, to “confront it on many points at the same time”. The issue here is a coherent pattern as a whole, not isolated relations between a small number of variables.

A similar stand is taken by Hedlund & Hägg (1976, p. 12): “Moreover, the kinds of hypotheses advanced from rich loose study material may be of a character that does not permit translation to hypotheses about simple relations between distinct variables. In this case, the richness of the hypotheses demands a corresponding depth in the testing of the hypotheses.”

To conclude this short discussion of some basic scientific issues: there is no a priori argument against the validity of case research. The case method can be used, not only for initial, explorative studies but also for research that specifically aims at both generating and validating (social) theories. It is even possible to argue for the view that case research in many instances of social and behavioural research is more effective and better suited than more traditional approaches.

CASE WRITING AS RESEARCH

When it comes to case writing in general, it is necessary to make some initial distinctions, both in order to clarify the basis of the discussion and to see where comparisons between case research and case writing is possible and fruitful.

One usual way to classify cases, deriving from their origin, is to divide them into the following three categories [e.g. Kjellén et. al. 1994]:

- armchair cases
- library cases
- field research cases.

Even if research might be based on previous experience (like armchair cases) and make extensive use of secondary data (like library cases), from now on reference will only be made to case writing, based on some version of field research. The reason for this is simply that this is the predominant mode of case research and consequently the kind of teaching cases that are closest to research.

A teaching case is usually written with one of three basic purposes in mind. The first could be called *argumentative*, i.e. it starts from a situation or a specific problem or set of problems in order to build an understanding of these problems and what kind of tools (models and/or theories) that are needed, in order to interpret and solve them. This in turn serves as the basis for presenting theories and models.

The second purpose could be called *illustrative*, i.e. it has a special set of theories of models that should be used, in order to either show students how they work or why they are relevant to practical situations and problems.

The third purpose is about *application*, i.e. the case is used in order for the students to practice their skills to apply and use some theory or model, predetermined by the course plan and/or the case assignment.

In all three of these situations, there is usually some kind of predetermined purpose or pedagogical goal, which determines what kind of case is to be produced. Students are usually not expected to derive new theories or models from their casework, nor are they asked to do any serious testing of theories or models by way of the cases.

This means that the rationale for researching and writing a teaching case differs substantially from the rationale for the research case, which is more “open”, i.e. its purpose is not predetermined but the aim is either to inductively contribute to theory development or deductively perform theory testing.

To conclude: there are many similarities between writing teaching cases and doing case research but the purpose and the starting point are usually very different and also what kind of final results that is produced. In this respect then, there is a divide between teaching cases and research cases. The next question, then, is whether it is possible to find some way of closing this divide or at least bridge it?

THE LINK BETWEEN LEARNING AND RESEARCH

There is, of course, one situation where the divide is closed, and that is when research cases are adapted for teaching. An increased use of research cases for teaching would also strengthen the much-wanted connection between research and basic education. Unless every need for teaching cases could be filled this way, it does not, however, dissolve the basic differences outlined in the previous section. The seemingly opposite objectives of teaching and research: on one hand to present some predetermined content, on the other to discover new knowledge, still remain.

So maybe the bridge lies in another direction, viz. to rethink the way teachers teach and the way that students learn? There are different ways of looking at pedagogy and consequently at what constitutes learning and how it is achieved [see e.g. Kjellén 2006 for a brief overview].

The way that the relationship between case teaching and case research is perceived is, probably, to a large extent predicated on the way that learning and education are perceived. If the basic stance is that knowledge is more or less given from outside the educational situation and the role of the teacher is to serve as the expert that selects and conveys this knowledge, then, of course, there is no room for teaching cases as research or as a vehicle for conducting research in the class-room.

If, on the other hand, education and teaching are seen from the aspect of co-operation, between students and teachers or among students, and if knowledge is taken as something that is situated and co-produced in a social context rather than pre-packaged and transferred, then there is an opportunity to use cases and case seminars with the purpose of joint discovery or construction of knowledge.

Exactly how this is to be implemented must with necessity differ between disciplines, student groups etc. Here, only one example business studies or management will be given, and more precisely organisation theory and behaviour. One important aspect or dimension of that is leadership.

Leadership is an area, replete with studies, models, theories, books, and articles with varying assumptions and prescriptions [see e.g. Yukl 2006]. One common way of teaching this subject is to present some of the theories and models (every professor presumably has her own pet views on leadership) and to let the students analyse cases with the help of these models. This might give some insight into the (simplified) models but rarely any real understanding of what leadership actually means in practice, in all its complexity.

Therefore, there seems to be an opportunity for using the case method in connection with leadership in a way that is more open-ended, more of a "journey of discovery" for both teachers and students. There is a need for carefully crafted cases, of course, but they do not have to be edited or pre-selected for their suitability according to some specific leadership model. Instead, in line with Lapierre [2006, p.2, note 5], they should be "thick descriptions" of people in leadership positions, and they should also reflect the fact that it is not always obvious which person or persons that occupy those positions and probably also depict a wide variety of situations and types of organisations.

The purpose of the cases and the cases seminars would then be to explore together both the meaning and the content of the concept of leadership and its practical implications for action in real-life situations as well. This will sometimes (or maybe even most of the time) demand of the teacher to hold back her own preconceptions and be willing to question at least some of them. The result of this process, properly recorded, could constitute research or at least serve as the basis for continued research of the subject.

Similar examples or teaching situations can be certainly found in most or all other disciplines. One possible format could be that of the eXperience Base (XB) [Putzler 1992], which teaches management and organisational behaviour by setting up the course as an organisation, with the teacher as the "Senior Manager" and the students as managers of different "departments". It is not case teaching, but cases might be part of the available material.

CONCLUSIONS

One fairly obvious conclusion from the foregoing discussion is that it is not really possible to completely close the divide between case research and producing case for teaching purposes. The basic problem is the difference in purpose and interest between the two activities.

There are some similarities, of course, in the process of finding the empirical material, organise it and analyse it, and finally writing it up in a suitable way. For the most part, however, the more narrowly defined teaching purpose means that both the case itself and its teaching note will have other characteristics than a research case and its accompanying analysis or interpretation.

So the task is instead to build bridges, i.e. to use every opportunity to write teaching cases and conduct case seminars that are open-ended and have the purpose of joint exploration and discovery, rather than transfer. Furthermore, this opportunity is not limited to the content but could also be extended to the case process as such.

The starting point would be critical and conscious reflection over what actually transpires in the case seminar. This could be done both by teachers and by students. Probably, the best way of doing this is to appoint observers and to brief them beforehand about what to look for and how to record the proceedings.

This could lead to at least two interesting lines of research. The first one is about creating some deeper understanding of how the case method actually works, as opposed to how it is thought to work or how it ought to work.

The other one would entail “cases about cases” or “self-replicating” cases, i.e. cases that describe case teaching and that can be used both to enhance the understanding of learning processes in general and of the case method in particular. This would, in essence, constitute research on and by cases.

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